PIERO
DA
CASTIGLIONE
STUART
STERNE

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## By Stuart Sterne.

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# PIERO DA CASTIGLIONE

BY

STUART STERNE

AUTHOR OF "ANGELO," "GIORGIO AND OTHER POEMS,"
"BEYOND THE SHADOW AND OTHER POEMS"

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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To

VICTOR G. BLOEDE,

THE DEAR ONLY BROTHER, COUNSELOR, AND FRIEND,

WHOSE TRUE HEART AND STRONG ARM

HAVE NEVER BEEN FOUND WANTING, IN SUNSHINE OR IN SHADE,

This Labor of Love

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED BY

S. S.

# PIERO DA CASTIGLIONE.

"Nay, are they true, — the strange, dark words
writ here? —
'To love, by heaven and earth, means soon or
late
To smart and suffer, — it is sure as death.'
To smart and suffer, — and must love be such,
Needs some time bring us agony and pain,
If it be perfect love? Yet ours has brought
But joy and untold happiness to us,
My Piero and myself. Ah, strange!"
And with
A puzzled shadow on the fair, white brow,
Maria raised her head, till now bent down
All eagerly above the ponderous tome
Held open on her knee, and let her eyes,
Questioning and as in search of answer, roam
About the wide apartment, still and empty
Save for herself, and even at noon half dim

With all its dusky splendor of carved woods
And wondrous gilded art and ornament,
Blent in a gorgeous whole, — where, rich on walls
And vaulted ceiling, some old master-hand
Had conjured forth amid blue, stainless skies
Young cherubs, linked by garlands of gay flowers
In never-ending dance, and where the light
From a stained window high above her head
Broke as through precious gems of many hues,
And slowly with the morning sun moved on
Across the marble floor.
"Ay, strange, most strange,"
She softly said again. "How can it be?
For ours methinks in truth is perfect love, —
Sweet Heaven! is not my whole soul bound in
him,
And his in mine? Yet, let me see once more."
And, drawing close the cushion for her feet,
She let the slender finger trace again
The long black lines adown the yellowed page,
Where, like a gleam from out a ruby's heart,
Now fell a fleck of crimson, lighting up
The words she read, slow and attentively,
As if she pondered each: —

"Soul, art thou prepared to take upon thyself the awful burden of Love for Love's sake alone, — for

thou needst hope for no other reward, — to know hunger and thirst without end, to be pricked with sharp thorn, and pierced by a sword of fire? Then art thou ready for Heaven, for thou shalt pass through Purgatory. They were a fair man and woman, who met half way upon the path of life. And a voice from heaven said: 'Ye shall be friends, but your portion shall not be equal. Thou, woman, shalt love and suffer most, shalt give and give, ten times and thousandfold, and receive but scant measure back from him. Wilt thou wear such a chaplet as that, set with pricking thorn?' A shadow came upon the woman's face, but she said, 'I will.' And the voice went on: 'In days of cloudless sunshine, he will share the light with thee, knowing nought of thy secret sorrows. But when grief touches him, thou shalt ever comfort, find one last drop of joy, one last flower of life, for him, — with bleeding feet kneel down to bind up his bruises, — lead him from darkness out to God. And he shall take and take, and never count the cost. Thinkest thou to bear the burden of such a cross as that?' The light had died out of the woman's eyes, but she said again, 'I will.' And the voice went on: 'And in the end he will turn from thee to a fairer face, and forget thee. Thou shalt walk on in thy desolate path alone, till God calls thee home to Him. Canst thou drain such a sharp cup of agony and death as that? Bethink thee well, — it means to be transfixed as with

a sword of fire.' And the woman sank upon her knees, and from her white lips burst the words, 'I will, — for Love's sake, my God, I will.'"

"Oh, she was brave
Past my belief!" Maria cried again:
"Great as the Blessed Saints in Holy Story!
And yet, and yet, — I do not understand, —
Would I might find and ask some wise, old head
To give me answer! Uncle? Ah, no, no,
Poor, dear, old man, what should he know of this!
Has he not told me oft, he 'd done with love
Full twenty years and over? Twenty years, —
That was ere I was born, — a long, long time!
Have done with love, — ah, that methinks must mean
With life itself! And Lisa will not know, —
Lisa, who is a happy wife and mother,
No gall e'er mingled with her cup of love.
But Piero, ah, my Piero, he must help me!
He, too, is young like Lisa and myself,
But wise and grave beyond his years, I 've heard
My uncle say, — ay, and of late, methinks,
Oft, oft too grave, and well-nigh sad. Ah me,
All things are strange sometimes!" And while her head

Sank lower, and the sweet young bosom swelled
An instant with a half-unconscious sigh,
She fell again to silent meditation
And self-communing.
Nor a little while
Perceived that in the doorway leading out
Into the sunny, pillared hall beyond,
Stood he she last had named, and gazed at her
With deep, enraptured eyes, — eyes that had fed
Upon her face and form a thousand times,
Yet never felt more blest in dearest joy
Than at this moment, when the beauteous image
Stood out relieved from the dark ground beyond,
Like some immortal picture.
She had pushed
The cushion far away, so but the tip
Of one small foot now rested lightly there,
And clasped her hands behind her head, and thus
Lay back well-nigh full length upon the couch,
Her robe of dark blue silk, whose delicate folds
Clung close, as with a loving touch, revealing
The tender, supple graces of a form
Surpassing fair, — a form wherein, for all
The softest, richest beauty of each curve,
Yet blent with every noble line so much

Of modest, virgin purity and pride,
That her most perfect, gracious, gentle love,
Yielding its wealth at but a glance from him,
Seemed ever as a new, nigh, strange delight, —
A marvel scarcely understood, whereof
His soul could never drink its fill, to Piero,
Betrothed to her a year, and now, ere long,
To wed her, — her, Maria! Ah, and how
Had God thought him, of all who sought her heart,
Worthy to win it, — pluck and wear forever
Upon his happy breast this fairest flower
That ever blossomed on the seven gray Hills
Bearing the ancient City! Countless times
The humble thought had flashed upon his soul,
As now, when thus he stayed with bated breath
Still gazing, — marked the snowy throat encircled
By one slim row of dimly gleaming pearl, —
How the fair fingers lay half buried 'neath
The wealth of wavy hair, bright, golden brown,
Its masses coiled and bound, yet scarce subdued, —
Noted the brooding thought upon the brow
Half childlike still in its white purity,
And how the rich, sweet lips were set, in all
Unconscious gravity. Her downcast eyes

Were fixed upon the ground, but well he knew
What light could kindle in their liquid depths, —
Eyes like her hair, a rare and wondrous tint
Of golden brown. Piero had sometimes said,
"When the Great Master fashioned thee, He loved
That hue so well himself, He used his all,
Nor ever could that shade be found again;
So thou wert left sole woman in the world
With living sunshine in her hair and eyes."
And suddenly thirsting for the look of joy,
That with his coming ever broke from them,
He moved to go to her.
She turned and saw him,
And, with a sweet, faint flush on cheek and brow,
Sprang up and tossed the gray, old book aside,
And flew into his arms, meeting half way
The eager, passionate lips that sought her own;
But then looked up and cried: "Ah, Piero mine,
I am so glad thou 'rt come, — for thou must help me
Read a dark riddle!"
"Ah, a riddle! Pray
What can it be that makes my cheery lark
So grave to-day? I stood unseen by her
And watched her for a while," he said, half smiling,

And gazing down into her upturned face
With infinite tenderness.
"Come and sit here,
And I will tell thee."
So she drew him on,
Back to the couch and her old place, herself
Perching upon the cushion at his feet,
Took up again the open book and bid him,
"Now listen, Piero mine, with all thy ears!"
And thus, one hand that he had caught and held,
Close clasped in his, the other on the page,
She read to him, in low, melodious voice
That sometimes faltered, the same sad, old tale
Conned o'er before alone, not looking up
Until, the bitter ending reached, she paused,
And eyes grown dark with unshed tears, at last
Were slowly lifted to his face.
But Piero,
Unmindful of her bidding, had but watched
The fleeting lights and shadows on her brow,
Nor closely caught the meaning of the words;
And when she asked, "Beseech thee, tell me now,
Can love be such as this?" made answer: "Nay,
Give me the book, — I fear I have not heard."

"Oh, Love, and wherefore not?" she gently said,
Putting the tome into his hands. And then,
While he fell now to study of the page,
She, with one elbow resting on her knee,
The fair, bent head supported on her palm,
Sat watching him in turn, — her Piero, hers,
In worshipful, deep silence.
Sweet Madonna,
Ah, how she loved him! Words could never tell,
Though she might strive a thousand happy years!
How handsome, yet how simple too, he looked,
To-day and ever! That fine velvet garb
Of dusky hue became him wondrous well,
Set off his stately height and well-knit limbs,
Where strength and grace were blent, — a noble-
man,
Ay, it might be, a very king disguised,
All having eyes to see had surely said,
What though they found him on the common
road,
In beggar's raiment. For unconsciously
All his whole presence spoke the princely blood
Of the proud house that traced its lineage back
In the dim past for many centuries.
One of his ancestors, he oft had told her,
Speaking of him with deepest reverence,

Fired by the holy ardor of his time,
Had tacked the scarlet cross upon his shoulder,
And leaving wife and children, with the cry,
"God wills, God wills it!" sallied forth among
The first Crusaders, who set out to free
The Holy Sepulchre. Ah, yes, she thought,
A crown had set most fair on those dark locks,
Through which she sometimes, in a playful hour,
Twined her glad fingers, — surely he was born
To reign o'er some great kingdom! And in truth,
Upon his face, for all its youth, and all
The glow of joy that but just now suffused it, —
On the bronzed cheek and proudly curving lip,
The firm, broad brow, and deep, dark, steadfast eye, —
There lay a touch, not cold and hard, mayhap,
But stern and grave, a something giving sign
Of strange austerity within, — the power
Of an indomitable, dauntless will,
Chiming but ill with tender years. In but
Those years alone, he was not much her senior,
And yet Maria oft looked up to him
With something like a sense akin to awe
Mingling with all her love, as one who ranked

Far, far above herself, when, as he sat
Discoursing with her uncle, and his friends,
On many deep, mysterious themes, she heard
Sage words and subtlest thought and wisest counsel
Fall from the lips whose modest eloquence
Compelled his stubborn elders to assent,
Well-nigh against their will. But yet for that
She loved him, mayhap, all the more, for oh,
Had she not found the secret to call forth
At any moment on those grave, young lips
The smile that first had touched and drawn her heart, —
The radiant, winsome smile, that, like a gleam
Of sunlight breaking from a sombre cloud,
Transformed his face with beauty all its own?
Had she not seen, again and yet again,
That quiet eye — whence sometimes for an instant
There leaped a strange, dark fire — melt suddenly
To passionate tenderness at sight of her, —
Poor, small, unworthy her?
And thus even now
Did he look up, half smiling and half grave,
Asking, "Pray, Love, what puzzles thee in this?

This was not love, — not truest love, — and he
Surely was but a poor and petty soul,
Bound up in self. Whence came this strange old tome?"
"I found it there among those other books
My uncle long has treasured up," she answered,
Waving her hand. And then: "And so thou sayst
This was not love, true love, — not love like ours;
Ah, Piero mine, I am so glad! For think,
Were it not strange and mournful past belief,
If faithful, truest love could break a heart,
As hers whose tale is here — ah, poor, poor soul —
Broke at the last!" And thoughtful, half aloud,
As speaking to herself, she said once more: —

"'Soul, art thou prepared to know hunger and thirst without end, to be pricked with sharp thorn, and pierced by a sword of fire?'"

"Nay," he repeated,
Confirming his past words, — "that was not love."
And, tossing in his turn the woful book
Down half impatiently, bent over her:
"But ah, Beloved, thou must surely know,

'T is possible that there may some time come
Even to a deathless, deepest, truest love —
Ay, soonest, it may be, of all, to such! —
A day of suffering and dark agony, —
That God may bid two souls made one by love
To part and say farewell, renounce forever
On earth, perchance, their sweetest hope and joy,
For love of Him, — at some great duty's call,
Honor, or faith, or country. Ay, consider,
If our beloved land were up in arms
Against some foreign foe, must not her sons
Obey the summons, — gladly offer up
Not blood and life alone, in her defense,
But love itself, a thousand times more dear?
Or think upon some sacred cause, like that
Of those two men of ancient times, — thou knowst? —
One whereof pledged himself to give his life
Even for his friend's, whose own was forfeited
If he did not return to set him free
Within the hour assigned."
She looked at him
Like one whose thoughts had been far off, and scarce
Well followed all his words, but rousing now,

As from a waking dream, she answered, "Yes,
I've heard the tale, but half forgot again;
Pray tell it over."
"Why, one would have slain
The tyrant that had long oppressed the land,
But failed, was taken and condemned to die,
But being wived, ay, and a father too,
Prayed three days' grace, till he might set his house
In order for his children, while his friend —
And he, 't is said, betrothed and soon to wed —
Surrendered to the tyrant, — in his stead
Prepared to suffer death if he delayed."
And now he saw she hung upon his lips,
A deep light kindling in her eager eyes.
"Ah, yes," broke softly from her, as he paused;
"Yes, now do I remember all. But pray
Go on, go on!"
"And but by one hair's breadth,
In truth had suffered thus. For his poor friend,
For all the breathless, hot despatch he made,
Spent and past hope, arrived but just in time
To stay the deadly sword, raised up to smite
The patient neck beneath. Out on the road
And fire and flood, a thousand stops unlooked for,

Had long delayed him; and at home the wife,
Who clung about his neck with thousand tears,
Beseeching him to tarry past the hour,
Let his friend die, ere he thus widow her,
And make his children orphans, — even as she,
The other's Love, had sought to hold him back
In her white arms, and with wild plaints and kisses
Prayed him to let fierce justice take its course,
Nor slay himself and her, playing the fool
As hostage for his friend."

"How," asked Maria,
And, slowly rising, stood erect and tall,
The slender form dilating with some new,
Unconscious dignity, "how, both of them,
These women, bore such poor and petty souls
That they had naught but feeble plaints and tears?
Neither found power, what though her secret heart
Might bleed and break, yet with brave lips to say, —
'Beloved, go! redeem thy pledge, perform
The sacred task whereto God summons thee!
It may be that these clinging eyes and hands
Shall loose thee, yet my soul must hold forever

Thy deathless image dearer than before
For that immortal glory of thine own!'"
"Ah!" Piero cried, and rising in his turn,
Something like wonder gleaming in his eyes,
Took into his one slender, yielding hand, —
"Couldst thou do this, Love, — bid me go? And is
The soul of my sweet, beauteous, tender bird
In truth cast in such high, heroic mould?"
"Yes," she said gently, with a still, deep fire
That wholly wrapped her, in the far off-gaze,
And with divine simplicity accepting
The highest praise, — like one who, having burst
In some supernal hour of sacred life
The bonds of self, can stand aloof and see,
And calmly judge itself, as not itself, —
"Ah, Piero, yes, methinks that I could give
Thy life and mine, — for mine must go with thine, —
If thou wert called in some great, godly cause!
Methinks that hearts knit by such love as ours
Must be made strong for any sacrifice;
Ay, in the very greatness of their love,
Find power to do God's bidding, — part, if need be,
For a brief space, while life on earth endures,

For naught that could in life or death betide
Could bring us real parting, — now divide
What God himself in tender mercy joined,
Made one for aye!"
"Maria!" he cried out,
In faltering accents, shaken to the soul.
And then, as with a burst of strange, swift joy,
"Ah, God be thanked, — nay, all is well, I mean,
That He has let me find and know thee thus!"
And so seized both her hands, and covered them
With fervent kisses, and for one long instant
Held them close clasped against his heart.
But she,
Suddenly withdrawing them, twined clinging arms
About his neck, and laid her cheek to his,
With the low words, "O Piero, Piero mine!"
While he in rapture strained her to his breast.
And when at last he suffered her to speak
Once more, "Ah, Piero, Piero! Nay, I know
Of but one parting that could break my heart,
And slay my soul itself, if that could die, —
If thou, grown cold, shouldst ever cease to love
me!"

"Beloved!" he exclaimed again, half startled,
In passionate, yet beseeching protest; "Nay,

How sayest thou, — what strange thoughts are
these! unless
My own soul, lost, rejected, perish first,
Must it not cleave to thine forevermore?
As all impossible" —
But she broke in,
"Thou 'st heard the story of that spirit sent
To Purgatory? No? Then I will tell thee."

And, gliding now from his reluctant arms,
Slipped back upon the cushion at his feet,
And with her hands clasped round her knees,
her eyes
Fixed for a time upon the ground, began: —
"There was a poor, fair maid once, who had
sinned
In early youth, and dying been condemned
To thousand years of fire in Purgatory.
And while she tarried 'mid the scorching flames,
Saint Peter, standing at the gates of Heaven,
Heard how she ceaseless day and night cried
out,
In piteous tones, 'Andrea, O Andrea!'
And yet again, 'Andrea!' — and at last,
Moved to compassion, went to her and asked,
'Why dost thou ever call on that one name?'

'He was my Love on earth,' she said, 'and now,
Since I have left him, dwells alone, and spent
With bitter anguish. Could I see but once,
Once more, his face beloved, willingly,
In patient silence, would I then endure
The fiercest pangs of fire!' And good Saint Peter
Bade her, 'Depart, but haste thee back full soon,
For the fulfillment of thy penalty!'
So the poor soul sped earthward to her Love,
But found him not alone and sore with grief,
But in loud company, with merry friends,
Filled to the lips with laughter, wine, and song,
Holding another woman in his arms.
And silently, without a moan or tear,
The soul crept slowly back, and only said,
'Saint Peter, I am here.' But he for answer,
And setting half ajar the Gates of Heaven, —
'Nay, child, it is enough, — thou art forgiven!
In that one moment thou hast suffered more
Than in a thousand fiery years of Hell, —
God bids thee enter here!'

"See, Piero mine,"
Maria ended, and looked up at him
With eyes all brimming over; "I can feel

That state of piercing anguish, which outweighed
A thousand years of Hell. Oh, she in truth
Was given to know the sword of fire, and drain
The cup of death, — and such it were to me!"

But Piero suddenly bent a knee and cried,
All his impassioned soul in voice and eye,
"My blessed Love! My Lady of Sweet Mercy!
Have I not told thee oft and oft, no woman
Even for a fleeting moment touched this heart,
That pride and beauty ever moved before
My heedless glance as but an empty show,
Till I first saw thee, — looked upon thy face,
Then suddenly, as by a magic touch,
The stony portals of my heart flew wide,
And thou didst enter in, its lawful Queen,
To take possession of thy throne, and rule
Forever there, through life and death supreme!
Art thou content, — dost thou believe and trust me,
My Saint, my God-sent Angel?"
A swift smile
Of deep, unutterable joy and radiance
Broke o'er the young face, all too grave till now,
And bending over him, where still he knelt,
She silently put quivering lips to his.

Then, while he rose and drew her up with him,
She hastily dashed the springing tears away,
Whispering upon his breast, "Ah, yes, I know, —
I am but foolish, like a wayward child!
Forgive me, my Beloved. I have read
Too long, mayhap, in those old books, and they
Have made me sad!" And then: "But come," she cried,
In swiftly changing mood, as if her soul
Flashed suddenly from dark waters into sunlight,
"Let us be happy now, as is our wont!
And oh, my Piero, I well-nigh forgot,
I 've something fair to show thee, — wait an instant,
And I will bring it!"
And so sped away
Swift and light-footed, leaving him to gaze
On her retreating form. For many moments
He stood immovable, then starting turned
And laid one heavy hand, whose fingers trembled,
Across his eyes. And when he drew it back
All the glad light had faded from his face,
Leaving it strangely ashen, wan, and old.

Then, slowly following, he passed back again
Into the sunlit hall, — that opened out
Upon the pillared corridor, and further
Through many noble, stately rooms beyond, —
And waited there Maria, who came back
Bearing in both her arms a great, white roll,
That she tossed down upon a chair, exclaiming,
In merry tones, "Ah, look now, Piero mine,
What uncle's good old friend, the Signor Carlo,
But just returned from his long journey East,
Has brought for me!"
And swiftly opening out
The shining fabric, snowy fold on fold,
Spread out, for Piero's gaze and admiration,
A marvelous texture, in good truth, — a woof
Finer than cobweb, richest silk, that gleamed
With dim, mysterious sheen, like molten pearl,
Shot here and there with single threads of gold,
That sent through light and shadow, in and out,
Pale darts of quivering fire.
"It is to be
My wedding gown," she said, with drooping lids,
Then, with a sweet, faint flush, glanced up at him,
Half smiling and half grave, and added softly,
"And — and I think, my Piero, thou hast said

That thou couldst wish that happiest of all days
Might come not further off than Easter time!"

He bowed his head, as if in mute assent,
And she, intent upon her robe, marked not
That he had answered her shy, loving glance
With but the strange, dim shadow of a smile,
Nor how the hot, swift blood rushed for an instant
To the dark, altered brow, but asked again,
"Dear Love, is not this wondrous fair in truth?
Ah, and I think it will become me well!"

And, acting on a sudden, merry thought,
She drew and draped, with deft, most nimble hands,
The soft, white folds about her throat and bosom,
And from the slender belt down to the floor,
Pinning them fast with a long, silver dart,
Plucked hastily from her hair. And then, once more,
Artless, like some sweet, eager child, looked up,
And gayly said, "'T will be like this, perchance, —
And shall I please thee, Piero mine?"
"Beloved,
Dost thou not ever please me," he began,

But paused and turned from her, and gazed intently
Down the long corridor, where his quick ear
Had caught the sound of coming steps. "Methinks
Here 's Lisa, — ay, 't is she!" he slowly said,
And so, with face averted from the vision
Too passing beauteous, and a deep-drawn sigh,
As of relief, watched her approaching. Lisa,
Child of the fair young nurse who once had nourished,
With all a mother's tender love and care,
The orphaned babe Maria, and her own,
At the same faithful breast, the little ones,
Each without other comrade, sharing long
All joys and griefs, — ripening to womanhood
Well-nigh like sisters, and beneath one roof,
Till Lisa, grown a tall, most comely lass,
Had wed young Bartolo, a noble fellow,
And her devoted lover from a boy,
But still felt free from out her humble home
To come and go as pleased her at the mansion,
To see her sweet Madonna.
She came now
Clad half in peasant garb, as was her wont,
A bright-red kerchief round the shapely throat,

And many strangely fashioned golden pins
Wrought through the curly hair, that matched most well
The clear, brown, ruddy cheek and sparkling eye, —
Came with light-tripping foot, but when she saw
The two together, half drew back, exclaiming :
"I crave your pardon, but I did not know
The Signor Piero here!" And then perceived
Maria's wondrous, white magnificence,
And, swift to guess its meaning, suddenly started
Forward again, close to Maria's side,
Striking her hands together in dismay,
And cried aloud :
"Madonna, nay, beseech you,
Away with that, at once! Have you not heard
To wear your wedding-gown before the bridegroom,
Even for an hour before the rightful time,
Is an ill omen, that portends, they say,
You 'll never don it on the day you hoped?"

"Ah, we are not afraid, my Piero, are we?"
Maria said, and strove to laugh, but finding
No happy answer in his face, the smile
Died on her lips. She, too, grew grave again,

And then, as if in unacknowledged fear,
Began at once, hastily and helped by Lisa,
To take the arrow from her belt, unwind
The softly clinging folds from round her form,
Till she stood free, and Lisa gathered up
The precious fabric with much tenderness,
And smoothed and stroked and rolled it reverently
Back to its former shape.
"Dear Love," said Piero,
And drew her to the window's deep recess,
"I must away now!"
"Ah, so soon?" she asked;
"Wilt thou not stay and sup?"
But he, unheeding,
And kindling with a sudden fire, went on:
"But I have news for thee, — ah, think, Maria,
Within a week we 'll have that wondrous man
I 've told thee of, the Fra Girolamo,
Here in the city! He will preach three days
At San Miniato, Convent of his Order.
That is to welcome him, its honored guest,
And mayhap in the field beyond, for thousands.
Past doubt, will flock to hear him, who from God
Bears power to stir the hearts and souls of men
As mortal tongue has never stirred them yet.

Ay, and thou, too, must come with me, Maria,
To drink a draft from that deep fount of life!"

"Why, yes, my Piero, surely if thou wish
I will so!" Yet the rosy lips were pursed
As if in half displeasure. "But I 'll tell thee,
I do not love this wondrous man of thine! —
Nay, let me speak! 'T is since thou didst of late
Go on thy journey North, and hear his voice,
That thou hast been so grave and silent, — more
Than was thy wont of old, — ay, and at times
So hopeless far away from love and me!
Ah, surely, though I may not often speak,
I see it, — feel it, here!"
"Yes, yes, — mayhap
'T is as thou sayst, — but God shall make all
well!"
He hastily said, and bending kissed her brow
In half-paternal fashion, and then turned
And strode away without another word,
Maria gazing after him in wonder
Till he had vanished.
Ah, what could he mean!
She thought with troubled brow. "Sometimes I
fear me
Some secret trouble weighs upon his soul,

Some grief I cannot fathom! Yet I know
He 'll some time tell me all, and I will bide
His own good time, as patient as I may."
Then whispered softly to herself, while now
A happy smile stole back upon her lips:
"Ay, and he loves me, — loves me! What may fall
In life or death, his soul is mine forever.
That is enough, — I could endure all else, —
Bless him and guard, sweet Saints of Heaven!"
And thus
Turned back at last to busy Lisa, asking:
"And hast thou brought thy little ones with thee,
Tito and baby 'Detta?"
"Nay, not her,
Madonna mine, but Tito waits below."
"Ah, then, I pray thee, bring him up at once,
I long to see his merry eyes awhile,
And when I 've done with him I 'll send him home,
Soon as thou wilt.
So little Tito came,
A winsome, tiny fellow, three years old,
In whose young, sturdy limbs and glowing cheeks,

And laughing eyes and sunny curls, there showed
His father's strength, blent with his mother's beauty,
And who was nothing loth now to be left
Here with the "dear Padrona" he had known
Since first he saw the sunlight.
And Maria
Sported about, turning well-nigh herself
A child again, in self-forgetful glee, —
Played chase with him a time, and hide-and-seek
Behind the chairs and couches, in and out
Among the pillars of the corridor, —
Stood watching, half amused, half tenderly,
The small, brave feet, that with such fearless speed
Twinkled across the shining marble floor;
And then, at last, — both flushed and out of breath, —
Snatched him up laughing in her arms, and bore him
Off to the open window, that o'erlooked
The great, old City, on her seven hills,
Showed him the hoary roofs and noble spires
That in the light of evening burned just now
Like mellow gold, and where more distant gleamed

The sluggish yellow river in the sun;
Then on a soft, bright carpet set him down,
And brought a chest of blocks, and deftly built
Most wondrous bridges, towers, and citadels;
While Tito first looked on with wide-eyed wonder,
But suddenly stretching out one chubby hand
With timid touch, then boldly tumbled all
Into swift ruin, with a shout of wild,
Delighted laughter.

Thus the merry game
Went on full long, until Maria said:
"Now, little man, thou must be architect
Thyself a time, and while thou work'st I'll try
That new, sweet song once more I've learned of late,
Yet learned but half, and would my Piero soon
Might hear as fair as may be."

And with this
Rose lightly from the floor, and went to sit
Upon a couch, took up her lute laid there,
And with a touch upon its strings, sang out
In low, melodious voice: —

"O joy of life, O joy of love!
When cloudless skies are blue above,
In starry Spring!
When happy warblers on the wing

Do mating build their nests and sing, —
O joy of life!

"O joy of life, O joy of love!
When God in cloudless skies above
Knits heart to heart,
That time, nor fate, nor death can part, —

"That time, nor fate, nor death can part," —

She said twice over,
Humming the air again and yet again,
Yet somehow always faltered at that line,
And so began once more, "O joy of life,"
But suddenly paused, and sadly shook her head,
Then with a sigh put down the instrument,
Murmuring, "Ah, no, — of what avail, — I cannot!
Methinks I 've half forgot the simple tune,
Nor does my voice ring true. How strange, how strange
He was to-day, my Piero! Nay, I would
That, after all, I had not let him go
So all unquestioned!" And in truth the sun
Would not shine fully out to-day, — she bowed
A brow once more grown pensive on her hand,
And fell again to musing deep and long,

Till a triumphant shout from Tito roused her,
Who had built up some marvelous pile alone.
She went to him and kissed him with much praise,
But then said gently: "Now, my little one,
Thou must go home, — thou shalt soon come again,
But for this evening, Sweet, thy poor Maria
Is weary past her wont!"

Seven days rolled by,
Swiftly as countless other weeks had passed,
In long accustomed ways of peace and joy,
And daily visits, long or brief, from Piero.
And though Maria marked again sometimes
That cloud of brooding, fitful thought in him,
And rapt aloofness, but a touch from her
Had power to break the spell, and through it all
He proved so full of passionate tenderness,
And deep, devoted love, she half forgot
The sadness and vague fears that haunted her
On that one gloomy day.

And now had come
The hour when she must go with him to hear
The Fra Girolamo, arrived of late,
His fame, like to a clarion's stirring blast,
Going before him swift-winged through the land.

From every town and hamlet he had passed.
Wherever men were met upon his path,
With ears to hear and tongues to speak, rang out
Praise of his name, and marvel of his deeds;
The miracles of passing grace he wrought,
This messenger elect of God, they said,
To purge the world of sin, and save men's souls

The sun hung low upon his western course
When Piero and Maria reached the field
Beyond the cloister, whose gray walls rose stern
And silent through the golden air. They came
Later than most, and now must make their way
Through jostling crowds, that still each moment grew,
To where good Lisa and her Bartolo
Had kept, with no small pains, a place for them,
Near the great tree, beneath whose spreading branches
A rude, low pulpit was set up, and there,
Ay, there, even now, stood he, the marvelous man,
And pushing from his brow the long, brown hood,
Let his keen glance range o'er the multitude,
Who from the city, and from far and wide

Beyond its walls, had flocked to hear him, — hundreds
On hundreds, till a close-packed, surging sea
Of eager, up-turned faces met his view.
All ranks and stations drawn together here, —
Workmen and masters, artisans and peasants,
In leather aprons, or bright caps and kerchiefs,
Some with their wives beside them, and a child
Held at her breast, or perched upon his shoulder,
And close upon them, mayhap, group on group
Of noble ladies with their cavaliers,
Gorgeous in silks and gems, — a soldier there,
Next a grave judge's cap and gown, and yonder
A ragged beggar leaning on his crutch
Beside a proud patrician's lofty mien;
And everywhere, dotting the gayer tints
As with a sombre shadow, dark-hued robes,
Gray, brown, or black, of monks and friars.
Maria,
Standing upon a stone found 'neath her feet,
That made her tall as Piero, with his arm
Thrown round her tenderly, but half concealed
By his wide mantle drawn about them both,
Long watched the motley throng till Piero whispered
Close to her ear, "Love, pray thee, mark his words!"

As with the lifting of the Frate's hand
An awestruck hush fell on the assembled thousands,
And low at first his voice ere long rang out
Deep, rich, and rolling as an organ's peal,
Drawing all wandering eyes upon himself, —
A frail, slight form, clad in his monkish garb,
The cord about his loins, yet seeming taller
And of more powerful mould than common men,
As, rising with the fervor of his speech, —
The strange, harsh, rugged features, darkly lit
With fitful lustre from deep, burning eyes, —
He suddenly towered into lofty stature,
Or leaned far down among the crowd, that hung
In breathless, wide-eyed silence on his lips,
Enkindling with a swift, strange ardor, caught
From him mayhap, yet not his speech alone.
For great as was that speech, and though he sent
Among them wingèd words like keen-edged darts,
Yet there went ever out from him a something
Beyond and deeper than all words, more great
Than any speech, — a charmèd magic spell
Breathed from his inmost self, until it seemed
The very air about, grown luminous,
Shimmered and shook and thrilled, charged with some rare,

Intangible, fine essence, subtle sparks
That, leaping outward from the fire divine
That quenchless, deathless, burned within his soul,
Had power to reach and seize and hold resistless
The souls of others.
Thus, while now and then,
Even like the ripple on a wind-tossed lake,
A secret stir passed through the multitude,
And here and there a rising sigh was heard,
He set before them, scathing, merciless,
All the accursèd evils of the time,
The sloth and sin and darkness and corruption,
Wherein the world was sunk; how rank indulgence
And shameless passions, lust, and love of self,
And greed of power, had spread, a deadly plague
Contaminating all, and sparing none,
Through every rank and station, high and low,
Till in the whole wide land could scarce be found
One soul untouched and stainless still; and cried:
"Ay, all of you that I see here, all, all,
Woman and man and tender child alike,
Are blackened with the deadly taint of sin,
Bring daily one stone more that helps to build

The Temple of the Devil higher!"
And then,
With all the thunders of his eloquence,
With flashing eye and clenched hand raised aloft,
As if he grasped and hurled a bursting sheaf
Of lightning on the unrepentant sinner,
Showed them the terrors of the Judgment Day,
The vengeance and the awful wrath to come
Of an offended God. And once, while thus
He stood, both arms raised high, and as it chanced
A purple sunbeam striking him, that wrapped
In sudden, lurid glow the towering form
And dusky, fitful features wrought with passion,
Maria fancied he himself must be
A creature from that fearful nether world
Of writhing spirits, doomed eternally,
Whose torturing fires, e'en while he painted them,
Played in fierce tongues of flame about his head;
And with a secret shudder in her veins,
She crept unconsciously more close to Piero.

And now, in truth, it seemed as if a breath
Of mighty tempest swept the multitude,

That suddenly breaking, rocked them to and fro,
Like seething billows on a storm-tossed sea.
A shudder seized on all, — cries, sobs, and groans
Rose up on every hand; some wept aloud,
And some upon their trembling knees exclaimed,
"Lord, Lord, have mercy on my soul!" And now
The awful voice paused for an instant, — then
A smile of infinite sweetness, suddenly
Transforming some grim demon to an angel
Of peace and joy, broke on the working features,
And raising up, like some benignant god,
Both hands in silent blessing on the world, —
In deep, melodious tones, that fell like oil
On troubled waters, 'mid the humming crowd,
Where each held back the louder sob or sigh, —
The Frate cried again:
"But friends, Beloved,
I do beseech ye, think if for all this,
Hell's fire and blood and gnashing of the teeth
Ye might exchange and know the love of God,
And peace of conscience, that might prove to ye

A bed of fragrant roses, soft as down,
And sweet as honeyed wine to parching lips! —
If when your souls cast off this poor, vile garb
Of sinful flesh, and trembling soar to Heaven,
The Almighty Father should fling wide at once
The Gates of Paradise, and bid ye enter,
Crying, 'Well done,' and 'Welcome, dear, my Son!'
To dwell in bliss untold, unspeakable,
With saints and angels, through eternity.
Oh, my beloved, in the name of God," —
And once again, in passionate entreaty.
His voice rose high, like ringing trumpet-tones, —
"Ay, in the holy and thrice blessed name
Of God and his most precious Son, who gave
His blood to save your souls, I do conjure ye,
Walk the steep, narrow pathway full of thorn,
That leads ye thither! Kneel, repent, cry mercy,
Unceasing day and night, in thought and deed;
Humble your pride, slay with a sword of fire
Foul *Love of Self*, for ay, 't is that, self, self,
Whereby ye fall, and Satan seizes ye!
To but the few elect the Lord vouchsafes
The grace of some immortal sacrifice,
To bring for grateful offering a crushed heart,
A broken spirit crucified for Him, —

But all, all, all, — the humblest and most high,
Man, woman, child, anointed king, or beggar, —
Can show, in some small way, a willing soul,
Renounce, give up, tread 'neath triumphant feet,
For love of God, some petty, worldly thing,
Dear to the cursed flesh, and were 't no more
Than but the glittering baubles, gold, and gems
Wherewith ye hang your persons, snares to lure
The souls of men to sin! And oh, sweet friends,
Let me beseech ye, by the love I bear ye,
To lose no time, and mayhap jeopard all,
But even this day, this hour, — here, — now, — at once,
Begin the blessed work of your salvation,
For oh, believe, the Awful Day of Wrath
Is close at hand!"

He ended, and Maria, —
Who through the long discourse had once or twice
Marked how the Frate's glances turned their way,
And for one burning instant fixed themselves
On her companion, and each time had fancied
That a slight tremor ran through Piero's frame —
Now plainly felt the arm that clasped her tremble,

And suddenly press her from his side, and then
As suddenly snatch and fold her closer still,
And looking up, beheld a white, set face.
But when in half alarm she whispered, "Love,
Art thou not well?" he, frowning, shook his head,
And motioned, "Nay, look there!"
Following his gaze.
She saw how at one point the parting throng
Made room for one, — a noble lady, brave
In all the finery of proud array,
Who coming swiftly through their midst, advanced
Close to the pulpit's foot, and, pausing there,
With a deep courtesy, drew from off her shoulders
A rich silk mantle, spread it on the ground,
And then, unclasping from her shapely throat
A golden chain, laid that upon it, saying:
"This to God's poor! Here I renounce forever
All worldly pelf!" And then, with downcast eyes
And flushing cheek, turned and withdrew again,
While a low murmur of surprise and praise
Ran through the crowd, now surging after her,

And pressing round the spot where she had stood,
Nor yet to gaze but idly on. For in
Another moment, fired by her example,
A hundred eager, other hands were stretched,
Bringing some offering, giving what they could,
Each in his humble or more wealthy power, —
Rings, chains, and bracelets, scarfs and belts, and kerchiefs, —
Till the strange, glittering heap swelled wondrous high,
And on a sign from Fra Girolamo,
Two friars, coming forward, mounted guard
About the unlooked-for treasures, while himself,
With words of cheer, stepped down among the people,
Who flocked about him all tumultuously,
Eager to touch and kiss his garment's hem,
Or crave his benediction. But at last,
With tongues set free once more, and casting off
The spell laid on them by that august presence,
Broke into smaller groups, and so dispersed,
Setting their faces homeward.
Lisa, too,
Though with a secret sigh, had offered up
Three of the marvelous pins that bound her hair,

And now Maria, passing by the pile,
Drew from her arm two slender hoops of gold,
And tossed them down amid the other trinkets,
Asking of Piero, with a mute, half smile,
Was it well done? But seeing he stood grave,
And looking down on her with strange intentness,
She clasped her hands about his arm and prayed:
"Come, let us home now, too! 'T is late, methinks,
And Uncle surely waits the evening meal
Till I shall join him."
And, in truth, the sun
Had long gone down behind the western hills,
And dusky, purple shadows everywhere
On earth began to gather, while above,
In faintly rose-flushed skies, fair, tiny isles
Of shimmering cloudlets floated peacefully.
So they set out to cross the field again,
In silence, save when once Maria cried,
"Ah, look how wondrous!" as there rose to view,
Slow following in the sun's dim, golden wake,
A glorious disk, the full-orbed moon, that cast
Their flitting shadows on the path before them.

But Piero made no answer, and Maria,
Divining that her lighter mood might jar
On the grave thought wherein his soul seemed bound,
Ventured no more just then, but mutely strove
To tune her spirit in accord with his.
But in a little while she spoke again:
"Ay, he is great, thy Frate, — wonderful,
Yet fearful, too, methinks!" "He is of God!"
Said Piero, briefly, and no more, as if
In that one word all needful things were uttered.
Then silence fell again between the two,
Unbroken till they reached Maria's door,
And she, perceiving that he suddenly paused,
Half shyly asked, "Thou wilt not sup with us,
Or later, mayhap, come again? Ah, see,
The garden surely will be passing fair
Beneath this moon, my Piero!"
"Not to-night,
Nay, not to-night, — forgive me, Love, — I cannot!"
And, with a passionate kiss on both the hands
He seized and clasped an instant in his own,
He turned and hastily left her.
'Neath the moon

Walk in the garden, with soft words of love,
Now, now, when all his heart was plunged in darkness,
An awful storm convulsing all his soul!
O Heaven! she little knew or understood
What conflict, what sore fever of unrest,
Had long dwelled with him, tortured and consumed
His travailing spirit, ceaseless day and night,
For weary weeks, though fanned to fiercer flame
In this dread, fateful hour! Ah, and how should she!
What though the war was waged for her and love,
Nay, without her and love had been no war!
For nought was hard save this, — ay, full as easy
As to put out to sea in some good craft,
Leaving behind shores fair enough, mayhap,
But yet not over-dear. But she, but she —
O blessed, unsuspecting, sweetest Love!
O God, did he not love her, love her past
Poor words to utter, — was not all his soul
So bound and knit with her, that thought of parting
Was like the thrust of death, that cleaves in two

A single bleeding heart! Sweet Heaven of mercy,
Nay, wherefore, wherefore had he ever heard
That awful voice, which roused his slumbering heart
From all the peace and joy it might have known,
Like other happy men!
How long or late
He vaguely wandered on and on, careless
Whither the unconscious feet untiring bore him,
He knew not, nor yet heeded; heard nor saw
Who passed him in the silent, moon-lit streets, —
Fond lovers, mayhap, strolling arm in arm,
Speaking in whispers; merry revelers filled
With wine and laughter, who an instant broke
The balmy stillness of the night with song;
Or some good Frate, hasting on to bear
The last immortal solace to some couch
Of lonely death or suffering.
Wandered thus
Till 'neath the full-blown splendors of the moon,
Now riding overhead in stainless blue,
There suddenly rose before him, towering up
In all the majesty of ruined grandeur
To loftiest, dizzy height beneath the skies,
And spreading out in boundless, vast dimensions

To right and left, the wondrous, ancient pile
Built by some Cæsar centuries ago,
That now, through many a broken arch and opening,
Showing like empty eyes from far below,
Looked down upon the silent, barren earth,
But where gay, countless thousands once had streamed
Through countless gates and portals, to behold
The great, imperial games, — the race and wrestle,
The mimic war, the combat with wild beasts,
The awful, deadly fray 'twixt man and man,
And last the martyr's sacrifice, whose soul
Broke from him in a hymn of praise to God.

Piero passed slowly through one mighty portal,
And for a moment paused and gazed around,
Alone, he thought, in this vast monument
Of fallen human pride, as he were left
The last man living in a desert world.
Here, too, within, but utter solitude,
And deep, unbroken silence everywhere, —
The great arena stretching far and wide,
With the tall, wooden cross some pious hand
Had here set up of late, — the endless field
Of steps and seats, half crumbled to decay,

That, rising row on row and tier on tier,
Seemed to mount half-way to the stars, — all, all,
Part flooded with a sea of silver light,
That clear as day showed every stone and cornice,
Part plunged in blackest shadow, cutting sharp
Upon the dazzling whiteness.
Then he moved,
And, lost again in self-forgetful thought,
Climbed the steps near him, 'mid the brittle stones,
That sometimes, giving way beneath his feet,
Slid down into the depths below, startling
Some gentle lizard, mayhap, from its sleep, —
Still swiftly mounted, pressing high and higher,
Till the last row was reached, beneath the arches,
And here at last sank down upon a seat,

Bowing his weary head upon his hands.
All his whole life — ah, and the bygone years,
Though few and brief enough by human count,
Seemed long and many to his heavy soul! —
Came floating up, — his sunny childhood, guarded
By a beloved mother's tender care,
Who left him, wholly orphaned, all too soon;
His stainless youth, left undefiled, thank God!
By all those sins wherewith fell Satan lures

So many to their fall. Yet had he lived
Even to these last, grave years of ripening manhood,
Like hundred other youths of princely house,
In gilded idleness and luxury,
'Mid merry, heedless friends, — inclined, mayhap,
At all times to more serious thought than they,
And deep in study of the art and story
And legend lore wherein the land was rich:
But what was that, all that? Oh, by the Saints,
What smallest profit or avail! What had
He ever done, attempted, or achieved
In that which must ten thousand times outweigh
All deepest lore and learning in the world, —
To bind the wounds of some sore, stricken heart,
Snatch one faint-hearted, struggling soul from sin,
And set its feet upon the path to Heaven? —
What for the good of man and God's dear glory,
In all his wasted days? And then had come
The joy of joys, God-granted, — Love, — Maria,
The crown and starry Spring-time of his life,
All whose blest, sweetest blossoms now must die!
And then, and then, O God! one fated day

That awful voice had sounded in his ear,
And knocked upon his heart and stirring conscience,
In loud and louder tones, with every hour,
And would not be denied, and swelled at last
To notes like thunder, or the trump of doom,
That on the last Dread Day shall rouse the dead.
And as a pallid spectre first, that comes
Unbidden to the feast and unobserved,
But whereso'er its withering shadow falls,
Dims joyous eyes and suddenly hushes song,
And gradually assuming more and more
Substance and form, and distinct hue and outline,
Until at last it wore the Awful Face
Of God Himself, — had crept into his life
The dream, the thought, the purpose, the conviction,
That he must turn from and renounce the world,
To give himself to Heaven, — a priest of God,
And humble servant of his fellow men!
Ah, consecrate himself alone, — take up
A new and fairer life, cast off the world
And all its base delights, — ay, once again,
That were but easy, deepest satisfaction,

Rather than sacrifice at all, save that
The world was summed in that one word, —
Maria!
Maria, — Love, — O Heaven, — oh light and joy
To heart and eyes, must they go out forever,
And leave him groping in blind, helpless night!
Would God demand that he should break her
heart,
That he must offer up her too, her too, —
Both, both, — two lives, — a double sacrifice?
"Maria, — O Beloved! — Lord of Mercy,
Oh blessed Saints, help, save, my tortured heart,
Teach me to find the path my soul should walk!"

With a fierce gesture he sprang up again,
And hastened back upon the way he came,
Down, down amid the sliding stones once more,
With swift, unerring feet, that never paused,
Till the arena reached, he went to sit
In the deep shadow of the cross, that spread
Its lofty arms above, — for here, here somehow,
It seemed relief and comfort must be found, —
But looking slowly up now, he beheld
The vast space suddenly peopled and astir
With new, strange, bustling life. There, on the
right,

The purple standards and the imperial eagles,
Close to the Cæsar and his glittering train, —
The white-robed Senators and Vestal Virgins,
Beside the noble Matron with her sons,
And all around, above, below, beyond,
A motley, swarming, countless multitude,
Thousands and tens of thousands, face to face,
That close-packed filled the benches, tier on tier,
From sky-line to arena. Marked an instant
The glint of rival chariots thundering by,
The drivers bent above the swirling lash,
That urged their foaming steeds to frenzied speed,
And gone like lightning, 'mid the clouds of dust
The flying hoofs left after them. Perceived
A tawny lion crouching for his spring,
Pierced by a javelin gleaming through the air,
And so roll over, wallowing in his gore,
While the crowd clamored. Saw and heard, close by,
The flash and shock of meeting combatants,
The crash of shivered swords and splintering shields,
The cries and groans of wounded men and dying,
And then the conqueror, as he set his foot

Upon the breast of him whose glazing eye
Beheld his victor gazing round in triumph,
Demanding his reward, and what his masters,
The sovereign people, bade him do; and they,
Leaning far down across the parapet,
Flung out innumerable hands, that made
The deadly sign of the reverted thumb,
While from ten thousand and ten thousand throats
A shout of mad applause, that rent the skies,
Burst forth again and yet again, and then
The awful cry, "Kill! kill!" — while all the sands
Grew red with streams of blood.
But suddenly
Through all the noise and din and wild acclaim
Of the tumultuous, roaring multitude,
Rose clear and solemn, like a peal of bells
Chiming together in one strain divine,
A single voice, proclaiming, "Peace, be still!"
And in a flash, touched as by magic power,
All the gay scene had vanished, — sunk away
Into the ground, — dissolved in empty air;
Nought now again but solitude and silence,
And the white moonlight in unbroken sheen,
There, everywhere, above, around, below,

And yet once more, now low and soft, the words
Came sounding, — "Peace, be still!"
And Piero turned,
And saw beneath the shadow of the cross
A form familiar and yet new, in sweetness
Ineffable, and passing majesty, —
A crown of light circling about his head,
A heavenly smile upon the silent lips,
And both his arms spread wide, — a living form
In stainless, throbbing whiteness, stirred as with
The pulse of some great heart beneath, that sent
A marvelous, mellow radiance streaming forth,
Like beams of quivering starlight.
"Christ!" he cried,
And sank upon his knees, and laid his face
Close to the ground, on those beloved feet,
Clasping the garment's hem with passionate arms, —
"Christ, Son of God! Thou who hast borne like us
The mortal burden, even to bleeding Death,
My Saviour, my Redeemer, help me Thou!"

He waited breathless, but no answer came.
Then, lifting up his face at last, perceived
The shining form still lingered for an instant,

Stood there unmoving, with mute lips, unbent
In but the heavenly smile they smiled before.
Then suddenly, while he gazed, this, too, the Christ,
Had melted into shadow, and he lay
Clasping the foot of but the barren cross.

Slowly he rose. And now upon his left
Once more rang out a strangely solemn chant,
And through the arena moved a motley band,
Half knight, half peasant, all with mantles white,
Their Master's hue, thrown over vest or breastplate,
While on each shoulder shone a flaming cross,
And him who marched before and led them all,
A noble, towering form, of princely mould,
Waving one hand that held a crucifix
Above his head, and in the other bore
A sword drawn from its scabbard, — Piero knew
The Castiglione and his ancestor,
Whose memory all his heart had worshiped long,
And as he turned to cheer his followers on
With voice and glance, half startled thought to see
An image of himself in those dark features.
A moment, and the chanting ceased, and all

Broke out into a cry so deep and fervid
Its echoes thrilled through Piero's inmost soul,
"God wills, God wills it!" and, again, "God wills it!
His will be done through all eternity!"
And with that cry still ringing, hastened on
With eager feet, soon lost to view beyond
The furthest shades.

The moon had long gone down,
And the last glimmer of pale stars was fading
In the white dawn that deepened in the skies,
When Piero, worn and wearied unto death,
At last bent homeward slow, unsteady steps.
One steady purpose only, like faint light,
Gleamed in his soul, grown dark with whirling chaos, —
Ere yet another day has run its course,
Get thee to Fra Girolamo, confess
To him thy heart, and by what he shall bid thee
Abide forever, for through him speaks God.

---

'T was close on noon when he awoke from sleep
That all-exhausted nature craved at last,
And wrung from him at every cost, yet made

But broken, brief, and full of troubled dreams,
And starting from his couch, that first long hours
Had seen him toss in feverish wakefulness,
And now at once remembering all, prepared
To sally forth again without delay
To San Miniato, swiftly as he might,
With but a touch of meat and drink, — so scant
That old Ubaldo sighed and shook his head,
As from the master's board he bore each dish
Well-nigh untasted.

Midday heat and glow
Lay brooding in the streets and lanes and fields,
Through whose long reaches Piero hastily passed.
But here, within the cloister's spacious precincts,
Stillness and grateful shadow everywhere.
Oh, thus in truth — thus grateful, still, and cool —
Must seem all life, sheltered by those blest walls
From the fierce heat and tumult of the world,
He vaguely thought, and drew a bell that woke
A gently tinkling echo.

"Ah yes, yes,"
Said the good Brother who admitted him,
"Their honored guest, the Fra Girolamo,
Was in, — ay, yonder in the Prior's cell, —
He knew the way? Down that short corridor, —
Now at his noonday meal, most like, he thought,

Yet he might go, — it was the Frate's wont
To see at any hour of day or night
Such as might come to him with weighty business,
And he had such, past doubt, — ay, ay, 't was plain!"
And with a kindly nod and beckoning hand,
He turned away.
A dusky, spacious cell,
Lit by a tinted window from above,
Its door left half ajar, where Piero, knocking,
And bid to enter, humbly bent his head,
Suddenly confronting, face to face, the man
Who dwelled so close to God. He was alone,
Save for a gray-robed, mute, young acolyte,
Who served him, standing, while he sat at table.
For on the simple, unclothed board before him
Was spread, in truth, a plain, most frugal meal, —
Some white and purple grapes, beside a dish
Of golden honey, and a coarse, brown loaf,
Next a slim glass half filled with pale-red wine.
He nodded silent greeting to the comer,
Then, after but a glance upon his face,
Pushed back his chair, — while, on a sign from him,
The young attendant vanished noiselessly, —

And leaning forward, fixed again on Piero
A strange, deep gaze, searching, as if to pluck
The secret from his inmost soul at once,
Asking, in gentlest tones, "What is it, Son?
I do perceive no common purpose brings you.
Be seated, open up your heart, oppressed
If I mistake not, by some heavy grief."
And when, assenting, Piero bowed his head,
"Speak freely, Son, and I will give you comfort,
Even as the Lord shall send me power."
And thus
Cheered and encouraged, — perching for an instant
Upon a seat, but springing up ere long
To pace the floor with hasty, restless strides,
That now and then paused near the Frate's chair, —
Piero began the story of his woes,
Suffered so long in solitude and silence, —
Slowly at first, and in half-faltering fashion;
But soon, as if some magic touch, swift-winged,
Had set the flood-gates of his spirit wide,
All his whole soul came bursting, gushing forth,
Like a resistless torrent. He poured out
In fiery words of passionate eloquence,
In ringing tones, with eyes and cheeks aflame,

His inmost thought, laid bare each deepest pulse,
The doubt and conflict that consumed him now, —
Unrolled the simple picture of his life,
Even as it came to him but yester night,
From childish days, until the Frate's voice
Had fanned the kindling conscience in his breast
To a devouring flame, — told all, all, all,
Save that he ever halted, and his breath
Came thick and fast, and cut his utterance short,
Each time that he would speak the name — Maria!

The Frate, leaning back once more, sat listening
Attentively, but yet without a word,
In seeming calmness, save that in his eye
Deep down a fiery spark began to glow,
And the long, sallow fingers now and then
Swiftly reached out, and thrummed upon the table
Some curious, soundless tune.
"Well, and what then?"
He briefly asked, in strangely quiet tone
And face unmoved, when Piero paused. "Your name?"

"Piero da Castiglione."

"As I thought,
Of princely house. — You say the voice of God
Bids you give up the world and be a priest,
Nor yet are you deceived by human pride
And sinful confidence, — in truth the Lord
Himself has called you, for your sole example,
One set so high in worldly rank and power,
Would win a thousand erring souls from sin
To their salvation and immortal life.
And call you this a grief, — to have His hand
In signal mercy trace the path for you,
Clear as the noonday sun? It is not thus
With all He summons, — was not thus with me.
For two long years, when first I heard His voice,
I wrestled in fierce anguish with myself,
My ceaseless prayer of day and night but this:
"Lord, lead me in the way my soul should walk!"
Not sure I should subdue the warring flesh,
And give my undivided soul to Him.
But you, — you tell me, too, you would obey
The sacred summons with most willing heart,
Yet half hang back, and speak of doubt and conflict:

I do not understand, — you 've not told all, —
Conceal from me some point of gravest moment!"

"Ay, for myself, but for myself alone,
The path were plain, most plain in truth!" cried Piero,
And, as despairing, flung his arms aloft,
His sweetest secret wrung from him at last.
"But I am not alone! My soul is knit,
Made one forever, with another life,
Infinite dearer than my own. I love,
And am beloved, — betrothed, and soon to wed!"

"Ah!" and a flash of darkly gathering fire
Leaped from the Frate's eyes: "'T was that, — I knew it!"
And, hastily rising now, he stood erect,
Confronting Piero, from whose quivering lips
Burst the same cry of wailing agony
That in the silent night had rent his soul:
"And must I break her heart, and offer up
Her too, her too? Will God demand — O Heaven! —
Both, both, — two lives, — a double sacrifice?

Father, have mercy!"
And with shaking hands
Thrown out in supplication for an instant,
Then suddenly struck before his burning face,
He bent a knee, and bowed his head like one
Who breathless from his Judge awaits the death-blow,
Or word of grace.
But the deep voice above him,
Falling upon his ear like the decree
Of merciless, inexorable doom,
Cried, ringing out in all its full, rich power:
"And would not this, a double sacrifice,
Be doubly sweet and grateful to the Lord,
A fragrant offering, more acceptable
Than myrrh and frankincense, and all the homage
Of thousand single hearts? Son, Son, rise up,
This is not worthy of your royal soul!
What, dare you speak of sorrow, are you bowed,
As 'neath some mortal agony, by what
To call a grief at all is blasphemy?
Nay, rise, I say, and lift your face to Heaven,
In loud rejoicing rather, and glad praise.
For God, in mercy and supremest favor,
Has wondrous blest, ay, called and singled you,

From tens of thousands, for a shining mark
Among his chosen, — given to you to bring
An offering past all offerings, — that crushed heart,
That broken spirit crucified for Him
You heard me tell of yester, when I said
To but the few Elect the Lord vouchsafes
The grace of some immortal sacrifice!
Rise up, I say!"

And slowly, painfully
Piero obeyed, and so crept to a seat,
Yet looked not up, while still the voice went on:
"And did you venture, in accursed blindness
And willful sin, to disobey the call,
Shut out, deny God's summons, sell your Saviour,
For the vile price of fleeting, earthly joys,
Think you that, at the side of her you love,
You would know comfort, — nay, one hour of peace?
Would not sore conscience, like a belt of thorn,
Like sting of scorpions, pierce your quivering soul,
Rankle in ceaseless anguish day and night,
Turn every cup to wormwood, — ay, transform

The very roses of your marriage bed
To hideous, mocking demons?"

Some low sound,
Half groan, half sob, as from a bursting heart,
Broke now from him who sat with face still covered,
And swaying for an instant to and fro,
Like a tall tree, that, stricken to the life
By a mad tempest, snaps before the blast;
For had not all his tortured, questioning soul
In silence long ere this perceived, acknowledged
The awful truth now here proclaimed aloud?

"The call has come, the sacred summons reached you,
And though the price were death, — ten thousand deaths
Of all the flesh holds dear, — must be obeyed,
For God is God, and swift to claim his own!"
Said the relentless voice once more, and then
There fell a moment's silence, while the Frate
Now in his turn began to pace the floor,
Slowly at first, but soon with hastier feet,
Then without pausing, asked in gentle tones,
"And does she know of this?"

"No!" Piero cried,
And, looking up at last, revealed a face
As ghastly white as death. "Oh, if she did,
Methinks that half my fiercest pangs were done!"
"Who is the woman of your love?"
"Maria
Di Montefeltro."
"Ay, I know the house,—
She, too, of far-famed race. I marked you yester
Among the crowd,—you and another; she
Beside you was Maria?"
"Ay!"
"A fair,
Sweet blossom on an ancient tree. But more,
A woman who methinks will not be found
Unworthy of the generous blood she springs from,
But if I do mistake not, bears from God
A soul as noble as her face and form;
A lofty spirit, strong and great enough
To rise at need to some sublimest effort.
Go to her, tell her all, and go at once,
For Satan ever lies in wait, to slip
His finger in 'twixt best resolves and actions,
Where we delay, and so imperil all.
Son, Son," he suddenly said, and came where
Piero,

Finding no word of answer, still sat mute,
And laid a touch as gentle as a woman's
On the bowed head before him, and again
In low, most tender voice, half tremulous,
"Beloved Son!" And Piero, glancing up
With troubled gaze, beheld in dim surprise,
That for an instant o'er the face near his
Swept a hot wave of passionate emotion,
That left the stern, dark features flushed and quivering, —
"Think not that I advise thee even as one
Who looking down from chilly heights, beyond
Or joy or grief, knows not whereof he speaks!
I, too, have bled and suffered, — I, too, wrestled
With pangs and agonies as sore as those
Consume thy soul, I ween! For I, — I, too,
(Thy sorrow and thy story — God has granted
Thy eloquent tongue a wondrous gift of speech, —
Have moved me to the heart, and I will tell thee
What none has ever heard before,) — I, too,
Loved in my youth, — loved well as thou, mayhap,
If not so happily, for from the first
She scorned me, as too low of birth. And yet
Her memory, the wild hope, perchance, some time
To win her still, made longer my fierce fight
With world and flesh, for Satan did but hardly

Release his hold. Aye, I have known it all!
Yet know this, too, learned in the fiery furnace,
That in his own good time the Lord will turn
The bitter cup of death into a draught
Of life and joy immortal, and the peace
That passeth understanding! So gird up
Thy loins at once, and dauntless sally forth,
A soldier of the Cross! I, standing here
An humble tool of God, to whom He sent thee,
And through whose lips He now vouchsafes to speak,
Anoint thee thus, — my love and benediction
Be ever on thy path!"
He laid his hands
An instant on the head bent to his touch,
Then slowly stepped aside, and said again,
"I tell you, go to her, and find it true
She 'll prove herself full worthy. And if not," —
And now, all softness gone from face and voice,
He cried in ringing tones, — "Ay, and if not,
She must be crushed and broken, as the Lord
Will crush and break, like snapping, withered reeds,
All weak, unworthy vessels in His path!"
And raised both arms aloft, to bring them down
With a fierce gesture through the air, as if

He hurled from him, and shivered into atoms,
Some tender, fragile thing that gave offence
And so must perish. Then more quietly,
With hands uplifted, as once more bestowing
His silent benediction, turned again
To where his speechless listener sat.
But Piero,
With a half-cry, sprang suddenly up, and fled
The awful presence, reeling as he went,
In the blind agony of gushing tears.

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Ah! it was strange enough, Maria thought,
That Piero since that eve upon the field
They heard the Frate, was not seen again
For three whole days! True, he had sent a message,—
Dashed down, she fancied, with unsteady hand,—
Yet only brief, and of but little comfort,—
Ay, one that, when she pondered on it long,
Might well have kindled rather than allayed
The sense of some approaching ill, so oft
Darkening her troubled soul of late:—

"Beloved,
I cannot come at once, though soon. A business

Of most momentous import, which thou, too,
Must learn of now, when next we meet again,
Still keeps me for a day or two."

For he,
Who ever thus held all her loving thought,
Wandering about, scarce conscious where he went,
Or far or near, through desolate, lonely spots,
And shrinking in half fear from every face,
Like some poor spectre, had in truth delayed
For yet another and another day
The dread encounter. For remembering — ay,
And could he have forgot a single instant! —
That when he next beheld those fair, sweet eyes,
He must wring from them sudden, bloody tears,
Stab to the life that eager, fluttering heart,
Which ever flew to rest upon his own
With infinite trust and all-surrending love,
Such sickening sense of terror seized his spirit,
Such a wild sense of hopeless dreariness
And black despair swept like a stifling wave
Upon his fainting soul, that all his frame
Shook as in fever, and his trembling feet
Refused to bear him on, while he threw out,
Again and yet again, appealing arms

To the dumb, irresponsive heavens above,
Crying within, "My God, I cannot do't!"

And yet had she not been full happy, too,
For all her Piero was so sorely missed,
These last three days! Maria thought again,
For yester there had come dear Lisa's birthday,
And she had made a little feast for her,
With the good Uncle's leave and aid, — himself
Consenting to go with them, — and had asked
Some fair young friends, and, above all, the children,
Tito and 'Detta, who in wild delight
Had clapped their chubby hands at everything
Of new and strange they saw, — and thus set sail
In two gay boats, with pennons fluttering high,
And joyous music sounding at the prow,
Far down the river, to a pretty grove
Of great, old trees; had spread their banquet there,
And afterwards all, young and old, had danced
In the gold sunset, till the rising moon
Cast their swift-whirling shadows on the grass, —
All, save Maria; without Piero's arm

Thrown round her, nay, it seemed as if her feet
Could never lightly trip to merry tunes!
And thus demurely at her Uncle's side
She sat, and but looked on. And so at last,
The feast quite over, they sailed home again,
Through a most passing fair, soft, balmy night,
Wondrous with star and moonlight overhead,
And gently rippling waves beneath the keel,
And faint, sweet scents, that came like happy dreams,
Wafted from either slumbering shore. Ah, yes,
Piero must hear it all, — all he had missed!
Ay, and to-night, as she sat waiting him
Out in the balcony alone, knowing
That he must surely, surely come, — to-night
Her heart was somehow wondrous light and gay
Despite its haunting fears, and once again
Said to itself, as oft, What, after all,
Could that momentous business prove to be,
That he had touched on in such strange, dark words!
They loved each other, — whatsoe'er beside,
Or life or death might bring, this, this was sure,
Fixed as eternal Heaven, — ay, and all else
Imported less than nought!

So, now and then,

She warbled half aloud a line or two
Of that same song whose air she strove in vain
To catch that day, —

> "O joy of life, O joy of love!
> When stainless skies are blue above,
> O joy of life!"

'T was learned now, and she knew
Would please her Piero, — ay, and he must hear it
That very eve, if so his Highness liked!
She thought, and smiled to think how she should charm,
As oft before, all trouble from his brow,
And drew more closely up from time to time
Her short, dark mantle, — Piero ever prayed
She might thus guard her from the damp of night, —
For golden summer now was fading fast
To russet autumn tints, and everywhere
About her well-nigh darkness reigned. The stars
And waning moon were up, but all the heavens
Had long been full of scudding, vapory cloud,
That gathering into thick and thicker masses,
Seemed to portend a slow-approaching storm,
And suffered only now and then a beam
Of sickly, half-spent light to pierce the gloom,

And for an instant show the dusky world
Spread out below.
Ah, yes, and there came Piero,
Beneath the trees, and now across the turf, —
She knew his form and step through all the twilight, —
Yet, oh how strange, with what slow, lagging feet!
Ah, well, he guessed not she was here without,
Or surely he would haste him twice as much!
And, leaning down across the balustrade,
She waved her hand, — yet he seemed not to see,
But with bent head approached and climbed the stair,
And slowly still, came down the portico.

But she could wait no longer, and sprang up
And flew half way to meet him, to his arms,
With the swift words: "At last, at last, my Piero!
Ah, for how long I have not seen thy face!"
And then, half laughing, added: "Ay, in truth,
Nor can I see thee now, — it is so dark!"
And, in her joyous welcome marked not, he
In silence and with strange, convulsive haste,

Strained her an instant to his heart, and then
As suddenly let her go, but led him on
A step or two, and lightly said again,
Drawing him down beside her on the bench:
"But come now, Piero mine, and let me shrive thee.
Confess, confess at once, what all this time,
Three whole, long summer days, has kept thee! Ah,
But thy dear hands are cold, — art thou not well?
Pray tell me, Love!" she questioned eagerly,
And, bending closer, strove with searching glance
Through the dim, fitful light, to read his face.
"Yes, yes, — ah, well enough!" he hastily answered,
As if half startled, and unconsciously
Shrank from the soft, warm hand she laid on his,
That instantly released its clinging hold.
And something strange in the low, husky voice
Struck with a vague alarm upon her heart,
So that she swiftly asked again, "Piero,
What is it, then? Thou saidst when next we met
I should know all!"

"Yes, yes, Beloved, yes,

And so thou shalt, — ay, presently!" he said,
And strove to speak as stoutly as he might,
Yet paused another instant. For again,
Though he had deemed that he was nerved at last
For this dread, awful hour, now it had come,
All the old terror in a whelming flood
Came surging back, and for the thousandth time
His soul cried fiercely out, "My God, my God!
Oh if thou hadst but summoned me to give
A tenfold life, — meet some swift, fearful death
Before a fiery cannon's blazing mouth,
Rather than this, than this!"
And so, with heart
Throbbing so wildly in his heaving breast,
He thought Maria through the dark must hear,
And while his flying breath came thick and fast,
Stifling the utterance of each rising word,
He cast about how he might best begin
Most naturally, and least to startle her;
And quickly said at last, with quivering lips, —
And in his desperate effort overstrained
The unsteady bow, and came to make his tone
Well-nigh more light than he had wished, —
"Why, Love,
Thou surely dost remember how, the day

We heard the Frate preach upon the field,
Many gave up their finery, willing gifts
To the Lord's poor, — thou, too, among the rest
Two golden circlets from thy arm. And now
What is there thou couldst offer up to God,
More precious infinite than those poor trinkets,
Or any worldly pelf?"

A stone's dead weight
Seemed suddenly rolled from off Maria's heart,
And left it bounding free as air. And thus
Deceived one fatal instant, catching easily
From him the swiftly changing, happier mood,
She cried half gleefully: —

"O Piero mine,
And is that all! Ah, look thee now, I have
A brave pearl necklace, and a coronet
Of ruby, — yes, and then my wedding gown,
And that is dear to me above all else, —
But if it please thee, one or all of these."

But he, first flushing hot, then turning cold,
To think how in that one brief, joyful word,
Her "wedding-gown," she had unconsciously
Summed the whole mortal, awful sacrifice, —
Flared suddenly into something like swift wrath,
And springing up, cried harshly: —

"Nay, Maria,
Thou torturest me, — thou wilt not understand,
Have I not said, not any earthly treasure,
Or worldly pelf?"
"Piero, I do beseech thee, —
What is this, — thou wert never thus before, —
Come, I must see thy face!" she said in turn,
And rising too, she drew him with her now
Into the hall, where from the gilded ceiling
A lamp, swung high, cast rings of steady light
Down on the marble floor, he murmuring faintly, —
"Forgive me, Love, forgive! Oh, if in truth" —

But when she looked upon the wasted features,
Wherein these few brief days had wrought a change
Fearful as ten long years of weary pain, —
Pallid as death, — deep lines about the lips,
And wide, dark circles round the sunken eyes, —
She cried in piteous fear, all else forgot, —
"Piero, — sweet Heaven! Piero, thou hast been ill,
Art ill even now, and wouldst conceal it from me, —
Stricken with some swift, awful, mortal ailment!"

He shook his head. "Nay, Nay, fear not," he said,
"It is not that!" And then bethought himself,
And nodded faintly down to her, while something
Like the pale shadow of a ghastly smile
Stole for an instant to the bloodless lips,—
"But ay, if thou so wilt,—mayhap I bear
A mortal ailment in my veins! But, Love,
They tell me this, like other ills that kill,
Will send me on the way to Heaven!"
And then
Perceiving how most passing fair she looked,
As now the dusky mantle, slipping down,
Revealed the pure, white gown, that seemed to robe
Her form in soft dim lights and pearly shadows,
A pale pink autumn rose upon her breast,
The sunny hair blown by the wind without
To delicate ringlets round the snowy brow,
And the sweet face, the beauteous, trustful eyes,
So wont to shine with eager, joyous life,
Lifted to his,—now full of troubled questioning,—
He suddenly turned away, and groaned aloud.

"I do not understand," she said, half slowly,
Unsteady, puzzled wonder in her voice.
"Nay, pray thee speak, and tell me what it is
That thou wouldst have me offer up to God!"

"Not gold and gems and satin gowns, — Oh Heaven,
Were 't but all riches of the earth and seas!"
Burst from him now in fierce despair, while yet
He ventured not to look at her again, —
"But what hast thou, — what I, — what both of us,
Knit with our deepest and most tender life,
More passing precious to our inmost souls
Than all, save their salvation, — all, save God?"

"Our love!" she cried at once, with blanching cheek,
And yet again, — "Our Love!"

He did not speak,
But only bowed his head in mute assent.

"And what of that?" she asked, with flying breath,
Wringing the hands she had unconsciously

Locked close together, — "I am blind, mayhap, —
My senses darkened by a sudden cloud, —
I do not catch thy meaning even yet!
Piero, 't is thou now who art torturing me;
I do beseech thee, by that very love,
Take pity, — give me light, — end this suspense,
Speak out this mystery, whate'er it be,
In one bold word at last!"
A breathless pause, —
A torturing, long eternity to both, —
And then there broke from his unwilling lips,
Faltering and slow, — "Have mercy, sweetest Saints!
God calls us to an awful sacrifice, —
I am to be a Priest!"

For one brief moment
She gazed at him wide-eyed, her trembling arms
Dropped helpless at her side, not comprehending
How in good truth that one, swift, blasting word,
Unerring as a deadly bolt from Heaven,
Had shivered into instant ruin, hopeless
And irretrievable, all present joy,
All golden memories of the happy past,

All sweetest future hope in both their lives.
Then the hot blood flushed burning to her brow,
And moving forward with unsteady step,
She suddenly flung herself upon his breast,
With one sharp cry, —
"A Priest! My God, my God!
No, no! I love, I hold thee, — thou art mine,
I will not let thee go!"
Yet as he felt
The wildly throbbing heart upon his own,
Her passionate lips on his, there seemed to pass
An icy breath through all his quivering frame;
A sudden, awful hush, a stony calm,
Fell on his travailing soul. The reeling ground
Was swept away, and sank beneath his feet
Down, down unending far, and he himself
Lifted above the vanishing, dim earth,
Stood looking back, and judging earthly things
As from a vast, immeasurable height,
And through the wondrous silence heard the words,
"God wills, God wills it!" ringing sweet and clear,
And knew the agony of death was past,

And the hour come wherein the Lord Himself
Bade him press forward without fear.
And thus,
Slowly and softly, yet with steady touch,
He loosed the clinging hands from round his neck,
And holding them an instant to his breast
Met with unflinching glance the eyes grown dark
With anguish now, and fixed upon his face
In passionate pleading, — and so pressing her
With gentle force into a seat close by,
Said, in a firm, clear voice, — and plainly heard
Each word he uttered, yet it seemed another
Who spoke and moved without his will, —
"Maria,
Beloved, thou hast shown me once Heaven gave thee
A lofty spirit, and most noble soul.
Dost thou remember how, not long ago,
We spoke of love and parting here, and thou
Didst tell me thou couldst find it in thy heart
To give me up, — thyself to bid me go,
If I were called in some great, godly cause?
I am thus called, — in the most godly cause
Man ever knew!"
Then while he stood before her,

Though sometimes moving off a pace or two,
He for the second time told all his tale,
Warming again to fiery eloquence,
For all the stony quiet in his soul,
In that great cause. Told all from the beginning
Of his first doubt, while she, with eyes aglow,
And a bright, feverish spot on either cheek,
Sat leaning forward, drinking in each word
In utter silence.
Only once, when he
For a brief instant paused, she slowly asked, —
"It is not then because thou lovest me less?"

"Because I love thee less?" he cried, "Oh Heaven,
And thinkest thou that my soul had then been rent
By all the mortal pangs that stabbed it now?"

And she again, in the same strange, dead voice, —
"And will God bid us offer up our love,
Not in life only, but in spirit too, —
To pluck from out our hearts the very thought
And image of each other?"
"No, no, no,

A thousand times! The Lord Himself demands
not
What through Himself is made impossible!
Maria, nay, — I swear to thee again,
Whate'er beside or life or death may bring,
I could not cease to love thee, — Heaven nor
earth,
Nor all the legions of grim Hell itself,
Shall ever pluck thy image from my heart!
While life and breath and consciousness endure,
We still may cherish loving thought and memory
Of one another, — thy dear name shall mingle
With that of Saints I call on, — the Madonna
I worship wear the features of thy face!"
He cried it well-nigh fiercely. Yet for all
The fervor of his speech, felt dimly still
That sense of strange aloofness from himself,
And how his glowing words appeared but like
A feeble echo of the past, put forth
Rather by one remembering hours of passion
Than him who lives them in the burning now.

She said no more, and he took up again
The thread of his discourse where he left off, —
Told of the wondrous visions of that night
In the arena, — of the mortal combat, —

Of Christ,— and the Crusaders, — and the shout
"God wills, God wills it!" that so long had
rung
Through all the echoing chambers of his soul,
Drowning all else.
She listened motionless
Nor broke again upon his eloquence,
By any word. But once when first he spoke
Of Fra Girolamo in their last meeting, —
How he exhorted him by Heaven and earth,
Not to deny his God, — she suddenly threw
Both hands out far from her, as if in protest,
And a faint shiver shook her frame.
But he,
Now pacing back and forth, and wholly wrapt
In his discourse, looked not her way again
For many moments. Did not mark how all
The feverish brightness of her cheek and eye
Had died away, and she turned gradually
White as her snowy robe, and whiter still,
Ay, pallid as the hue of very death;
That she leaned back, the ashen lips firm set,
Grasping the chair with hard, convulsive hands,
Like one who, stricken to the quivering life,
Would yet shut in the cry of agony,
While all unconscious breaking from her eyes,

Great silent tears rolled down unchecked, unheeded,
O'er the wan cheeks.
But when he ended now,
And waiting some response that did not come,
Ventured at last to turn to her once more,
And saw her thus, — so white and still and brave,
So filled and wrung with sorest anguish, yet
So strong in noblest courage and resolve, —
The sight unlooked for smote his shaken soul
With such a mad, intolerable pang
Of passionate love, and tender grief and pity,
That all the icy dumbness which so late
Had struck his heart in fetters, suddenly burst,
And for another instant earth reclaimed him,
And falling on his knees with gushing tears
And one wild cry, — "Maria! — God, my God!
Demand of me what is in mortal power,
Not this, not this, — I cannot, cannot do 't, —
*I will not give her up!*" he hid his face,
Sobbing aloud, deep in her garment's hem.

She suffered it in silence for a moment,
Then looking up, and finding only now
She too was weeping, hastily dried her tears,

And slowly rose, laying a gentle hand
On his bowed head.
"Nay, Piero mine," she said,
And the low, tender voice was firm and clear, —
"Not so, — this is not well for thee or me! —
Beloved, go, — redeem thy pledge, accomplish
The sacred duty God bids thee perform,
For I myself so charge thee! Not in vain
Dost thou recall the words I spoke that day, —
Thou shalt not find me feebler and more small
Than thou hadst cause to think me, nor yet wanting
In larger faith, now that the hour has come
When faith is tried. I will not flinch, — I said
I could renounce thee, yield thy life and mine,
If thou wert called in some great, godly cause,
And that my soul should hold thee but more dear,
For that immortal glory of thine own.
I give thee up to God! Rise, I beseech thee,
Rise and be strong!"
And drawn as by some power
Compelling blind subjection, he obeyed,
And rose upon his feet, and turned to her,
Though yet for many moments he discerned

Her face but dimly, through his streaming tears,
And listened blindly, while she said again, —
"Thou thinkest it right, and that alone should serve
To tell me all there's need for me to learn,
Yet can I clearly for myself perceive,
The Lord Himself in truth has summoned thee.
But know this, too, — thy path to this resolve,
To accept His call, has been through tears of blood,
And God forbid, Beloved, I should add
A feather's weight to thy sore burden, prove
A clog and hindrance to thy toiling feet!
Thou thinkest it right and lovest me, — naught, thou sayst,
Shall ever pluck my image from thy heart, —
It is enough, — I can endure all else!"

He plainly saw her now, and though she spoke
With simple, quiet sweetness as before,
He knew this hour had burned away and withered
Forever and past hope, from out her soul,
That last, sweet touch of tender, lingering childhood,
That made her sunny life so beautiful, —

Struck dumb for all time hence, on those grave
lips,
Gay song and merry laughter, leaving her
A full-grown woman. One to whom had come,
And who unquestioning and resigned accepted,
Even as her natural birthright in the world,
All the sad heritage of womanhood,
Of tears and suffering and most bitter hurts
Got in the fray, and patiently endured
In the unmurmuring dignity of silence;
And yet a womanhood that left untouched
The perfect, virgin purity that hedged her
Round like a halo ever. And though now
His eyes once more welled over with hot tears,
A something in her voice and look, rapt her
So far away from him, he stood apart,
And ventured not, for all his thirsting soul,
To snatch her to his heart.

"Ay, aught, aught else
I can endure, so we still love each other, —
Endure with thee — our souls made strong, Be-
loved,
Even by the very greatness of our love,
For any sacrifice!" she said again,
Unconsciously in darkness now repeating
The self-same words she spoke when skies were
fair.

"Love lives, — so all is well, ay, passing well!
For now, what though we offer up to God
All dearest joys of earth, — within our hearts
We still may bear each other tender thoughts,
Still meet in spirit day by day as now,
And find each other in that common love
Of God and man and duties manifold,
In that new life we both shall know, — I, too,
Henceforth renounce the world, and in some Cloister
Amid sweet charities, will end my days."

But at that word he started, — and cried out, —
"Maria, — Nay, not so! — I thought, — I weened,
It might be thou so young and fair, — shouldst some time
Learn to forget, mayhap, — and yet and yet" —
But paused abruptly, his faint, faltering speech,
Brought to a sudden stop by one swift glance
And gesture from Maria, instantly
Catching the import of his broken words.

"Piero, not that!" she said, and in her voice
There thrilled a new, strange note, while she threw out
One hand as warding off some unseen foe,

And all the slender, yielding form seemed clothed
With something like a touch of majesty, —
As some fair, mournful queen uncrowned, who sees
Her throne in ruins, but yet ever holds
The memory of her greatness unforgot, —
"Not that, if thou still lovest, and wouldst not wound me
More sore and deep than any word of thine
Has pierced me yet! The altar of our love
We thought to rear in gladness here on earth
Lies broken, but, thank God! not desecrated,
Nor with its sacred fires gone out or spent.
No stranger hand shall ever touch the shrine,
No stranger foot approach the spot, hallowed
Through life and death to thee and me alone.
I may not be thy wife, and can but live
The bride of Heaven. Ay, it is thus resolved
Past question or recall! Even here and now,
As thou wast speaking, there rose up before me
All the new life we both must enter on, —
There is much work for us in this sad world
Among God's poor and aged and infirm, —
We shall not be unhappy, and the Lord
Will send us strength at need! I may not dare" —

She said, and with a faltering, dreary gesture
Put one slow hand an instant to her brow —
"To tell thee yet that God Himself has deigned
To summon me to this, — it is thy voice,
Piero, thy voice alone, that now I follow,
But some time, mayhap, my soul, too, shall be
Among His Own Elect!"
And standing now
With hands clasped humbly to her breast, and eyes
Filled with unconscious, passing beauteous light,
Uplifted to the heavens in trust sublime, —
She seemed to Piero, gazing breathless still,
The white-robed Priestess of those sacred fires
Of their immortal love, that she would guard
Forever, as she said, — and all undone
He suddenly bowed him to the ground again,
And touched her garment's hem with reverent lips
Of passionate adoration, crying out:
"Maria, — Angel, — Saint! No more, no more,
Lest thou wouldst have me perish, — oh, no more!"
And then before him queen and saint and priestess,
All, all had vanished, and his swimming eyes

Saw nothing more, save but the worshiped
woman,
And springing up now, with a stifled cry,
He snatched her in his hungry arms at last,
And strained her to his heart in speechless rapture,
Covering her hair and brow and eyes and lips
Again and yet again with fervent kisses,
As if he drank his last at that sweet fount,
And could not drink enough, but still unfilled,
Though death were in the draught, drank on
and on,
With thirst unquenched.
And for long moments found
No word, save in a breathless, broken murmur, —
"O Love, Love, Love! — Maria! — Oh, thank
God!"
But then at length, — "Thou 'st given me life,
new life, —
Made strong and glad again my fainting soul;
Nor dare I say but for thyself thou too
Hast chosen passing well! We both shall bring
Our love enshrined in larger love to God,
As in a casket set with priceless gems,
Before the throne of His immortal Grace,
And He shall take the offering and some time,

What now we thus renounce for Him in tears,
Give back in tenfold joy, — grant us at last
To meet in Heaven, made one again forever, —
Love, oh, my Love!"
"But here on earth?" she asked,
And slowly raised her head from off his breast,
Where still his clinging arms would hold her close.
"Beloved, tell me, pray, our parting here
Must not be made at once, — this very hour?"
And for the first time now, the steady voice
Broke at those trembling words.
"No, no," he said,
And drew a long, deep sigh. "No, not at once!
I am to enter San Miniato's School,
But all the halls are full, and I must wait, —
Some weeks mayhap, — until the next in turn
Shall be dismissed, and so make room for me.
Nay, I shall come to-morrow, — I myself
Must tell thy Uncle how our lives are changed, —
Come several times, — ay, oft-times more, perchance,
Though not so oft, may be, as heretofore,
For, Love, methinks even from this very hour
Our souls in renunciation should begin
Their godly task."

She gently smiled and nodded,
And, wholly soothed again from that swift fear,
Said but once more: "Ay, — all is passing well!"
And thus with bravely smiling lips and eyes
Bid him farewell at last, — it must have been
Far in the night, she thought, — and as he went
With hasty steps, not looking back, she marked
How the fierce storm long gathering overhead
In darkened skies had burst upon the earth,
And heard the wild rain rushing down without,
And distant thunder roll. But quietly
Passed onward to her silent chamber, where
The eternal lamp burned at the Virgin's shrine,
With dim, unfaltering light, sent to her rest
The drowsy little maid, who started up
With stammered words of half apology,
And then herself threw off her outer robes,
Unbound and swiftly braided for the night
The long, rich masses of bright hair, and went
To kneel in prayer in the accustomed place
On the low cushion, 'neath the crucifix, —
The Saviour's image, carved of some dark wood
And yellow ivory, made priceless rich
By time and skill and thousand saintly memories
Clustering about each line. But when she strove

To find the wonted, all familiar words,
And would have lifted up her heart to Heaven,
Prepared to dedicate and give it wholly
In that new sacrifice, all strength and calm
Suddenly forsook her, — all the fortitude
And wondrous courage, drawn from Piero's presence,
That while he lingered and she leaned on him,
Feeling her fervor kindle at his own,
Sustained her, — seemed to rise beneath her feet
A magic growth that bore her up with it
Far from the world, close to the stars and God, —
Gave way beneath her, like a crumbling tower,
And sent her back to earth with one sharp shock.
Till falling forward prone upon her face,
While a mad gush of tears broke from her eyes,
And sobs that would have rent the slender frame
Burst from the quivering lips unhindered now,
Her bleeding soul cried out: O God, my God,
Impossible! It could not, could not be!
Would there be earth and heaven, and day and night,
And flowers and sunshine, — Spring and Fall and Summer,
Ay, very life itself, without their love!

And must she live without him all her days,
His smile, his voice, his loving word and touch,
Whose every breath and look were passing dear,
Whose thought and image had been twined and knit
So long and so indissolubly close
With every living fibre of her soul,
She could not now remember when her heart
Had throbbed at all, ere it could throb for him!
O God, my God, have mercy! O sweet Christ,
O Holy Virgin, — all ye Saints and Angels!
How had she sinned that there should come to her,
Her young, glad life, this agony of pain,
Sorer than all — !
And there rose up before her
The death-sad words she read in that old book
That unforgotten day not long ago, —
Not long? O Heaven, a dark eternity,
A troubled sea, rolled 'twixt that day and this!

"Soul, art thou prepared to take upon thyself the awful burden of Love for Love's sake alone? To know hunger and thirst, to be pricked with sharp thorn, and pierced by a sword of fire?"

And then her heart turned on itself and questioned, —

And if thou couldst, wouldst thou make all undone,
Sweep this great love, with all its deadly anguish,
From out thy life, as it had never been?
And all her soul rose up in passionate protest, —
No, no, — a thousand and a thousand times!
More sweet, my God, that I have known and loved him,
For all the bitterness of this fierce hour,
Than had I never known! Through him I found
And hold true life eternal here on earth,
Through him shall some time come to me in heaven
Life everlasting. O my Love, my Love!
And thou still art my Love. My God, I thank Thee,
That all is thus, and passing well!
And then
Came to her mind the soul that had endured
In one brief moment agony outweighing
A thousand years of Hell, to see her love
Clasping another woman in his arms,
And thought again, while all her heart seemed wrung
With infinite tender yearning and compassion, —

Oh, poor, poor stricken spirit, quite forlorn!
Dear Lord, who dealst with me in wondrous mercy,
What is my grief to hers, — I have not lost him!
And thinking thus her tears flowed freely still,
But now more quietly, and more for her
Who not amid the very joys of heaven
Could e'er know peace, than for herself, and slowly
Her sobs, grown faint and fainter, died away,
Even while she pleaded: "Oh my God, I know
It is not possible this cup should pass,
But yet Thy will, not mine, be done! Give me
But strength, but strength to take my burden up,
And bear it bravely on!"
And so lay still, —
Her burning face pillowed upon her arms,
Her floating tresses half unbound again,
Making a shimmering veil about her form, —
Quite still, unmoving, without sound or tear,
A long, long time, — how long she might not say,
Yet felt how gradually a new, sweet peace
Stole gently back, and sank into her soul,
To fill it as with sweet, soft, fragrant balm, —
God's blessed peace, that passeth understanding, —

And knew her prayer was answered, — that for her,
Her too, the agony of death was done
Forevermore.
Slowly she rose at last,
And now crept to her couch, and as she glanced
Through the dim window, saw a tardy dawn
Whitening the skies, and that the storm was over,
But that brown leaves and blossoms strewed the ground,
And that in one brief, tearful night, all, all
The summer's lingering glories had departed,
And dreary autumn come into the world.

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And that blest peace of God abode with her,
Well-nigh unbroken, through the coming days.
For though her Uncle, who had set his heart
Upon this union, stormed awhile, when Piero
First broke the astounding news to him, and swore
They were two fools, who knew not their own minds,
And yet would live to rue the rash resolve,
And dear, fond Lisa wept to break her heart,
And all their common friends made much ado,

Held up their hands in marvel and surprise,
And dubiously shook wise or foolish heads, —
Maria her own self, alone unmoved
Amid the general stir and cry, bore all
With sweet serenity and gentle patience,
Soothed the sharp wrath of one, and comforted
The other's passionate grief as best she might,
Meeting all fear and doubt and opposition
With but the brief, unalterable words, —
"Piero is called of God, and I through him."
And came in truth to silence them at last,
While to herself she ever said again, —
"He thinks it right and loves me, — all is well!"

So when poor Lisa, tossing up her apron
In blank despair about her head, cried out:
"But oh, sweet Saints, the wedding-gown, — beseech you,
The beauteous wedding-gown!" she smiled, and said:
"Why, that will not be lost, for I shall wear it
The day that I am made the Bride of Heaven."
Till Lisa, wondering, thought a miracle
Had verily been wrought in the dear heart
Of her Madonna! Ah, if she herself
Had some time known such sore probation, thus

Been ever parted from her Bartolo,
Ere they were wed, or now, — oh Grace, what had
Become of her! Nay, might she be forgiven,
But God be thanked, not all were called to be
The Bride of Heaven!
But once, when first again
Since the great change had come into her life,
She, on Maria's earnest prayer, had brought
The little Tito up to her, Lisa
Had seen the marvelous courage that sustained her
Past all belief, for one brief instant fail.
For while she played and laughed with him as oft,
She suddenly stopped and knelt upon the floor,
And caught him to her heart, and burying thus
Her quivering face on the bright, curly head,
Broke into weeping, silent and subdued,
But yet that shook her with its inward passion,
Till Lisa, her own eyes swift welling over
With dumb, responsive tears, thought in her heart, —
Oh, sweetest Saints, she weeps the little Tito
That might have come to her! and scarce held back
A stifling, piteous sob.

But in a moment
Maria then looked up, and shook her head,
Dashing her tears away, and strove to smile
With that brave smile which had been hers of late,
Since the great change, — a smile more sad than tears
It seemed to Lisa, — and released the child,
And as divining all the other's thoughts,
Said gently: "Nay, beseech thee, Lisa mine,
Be not so grieved! I am but weak and foolish,
For all is well with me, — believe, — most well!
Why, I shall have about me every day
Full many little Titos, — none, mayhap,
As fair as thine, but yet I love them all.
I 've told thee, that above the Convent's portal
Where I shall go, our Lord's blest words are writ —
'Suffer the little ones to come to me.'
The Sisters take poor orphan children in
To clothe and feed and lead to holy ways,
And I may work among them when I please,
So the good Abbess told me, whom I saw
At once, thou knowst, when this was first resolved.
Though I am not to enter there, till Piero
Shall join his order."

Yes, and he had come
As he had promised, on the morrow following
That unforgotten night, and after, too, —
Not oft, — but once, mayhap, in seven long days, —
And not to tarry long, but still he came
Again and yet again, and to Maria
It ever brought a joy deep as of old,
To look once more on that beloved face,
Grown calmer now, if sometimes stern and sad,
Than she of late had known it. Ay, his presence
Brought sunshine with it still, though both of them,
As if in silent understanding, mindful
Of what he said of renunciation, best
Begun even now, at once, had gradually
Dropped all the infinite tender words of love
And soft endearment, — weaned them more and more
From all its passionate, nameless, sweet caresses,
And met and parted now on many a day
With but a kindly glance and clasp of hands,
Like sober, old-time friends. And so at last
Came to talk calmly oft, as of a thing
Most natural, of their new life and duties,
Of all the noble work for God and man

That waited them, — as they had once been wont
To talk of that dear home they thought to make
Together, in the happiness of love, —
Yet dauntless, with unflinching souls pressed on,
Casting no glance behind.
One only time,
When he had stayed beyond his wont, did Piero —
With fleeting touch upon the gold-brown hair
That, as he vowed, had caught and held the sunlight,
And been his heart's delight — ask with a sigh,
"And must all this fall 'neath the cruel shears?"
"Ay, and this too," she answered, — "ay, this too!"
And one brief instant twined a timid finger
Through his dark locks, as she had bravely done
In bygone days, a thousand happy times,
Then, swiftly flushing, drew her hand away,
And both one instant sat with face averted;
But when they sought each other's eyes again,
They faintly smiled, and took each other's hands,
And spoke of other things.
And once he said:
"Beloved, — for I still may call thee so,
A little while, ay, and in truth forever, —

In that large meaning taught us by our faith,
Sometimes methinks that seeing naught below
Which pleased Him half so well, God did so love
Our blessed, priceless love above all others,
He would preserve it pure and undefiled,
Undimmed, unsmirched by any earthly taint,
As first it sprang within our souls, even like
A stainless, radiant, virgin-hearted lily,
Unutterably fair and sweet, — and so
In tender mercy plucked it here on earth,
To set it in His Heavenly Garden, there
To bloom untouched, in never-fading beauty,
Through all eternity! I think, in truth,
We should have loved each other, thou and I,
Through all the coming years of mortal life, —
And yet who knows, who knows what might betide!
We are but poor, frail creatures, full of sin,
And Satan has a thousand wiles and snares
Wherewith to lure our souls. But now, but now, —
O Love, let us rejoice while we have breath, —
What storm, what chance, what change, what touch of time,
Could blast or break or wilt the perfect flower,
At God's beloved feet."

"Ay, Piero mine,"
She gently said, — and then again those words,
Uttered so oft, "ay, all is passing well!"
And this fair image of the stainless lily
Dwelled with her long, and ever gave her strength.
For sometimes when she woke at dead of night,
And swiftly starting, found her pillow wet
With hot, unconscious tears shed in her sleep,
And her roused spirit crying out aloud
With such mad thirst for its lost happiness
That not all fervid prayers she sent to heaven
Could still its craving, — suddenly seemed to spring
A lily 'neath the very hands she pressed
Upon her aching heart, until she thought
To see it gleaming through the dark, and drank
Its heavenly fragrance, and was comforted.

Thus had some weeks rolled by, — slow and yet fast,
And not without some broken gleams of joy,
What though they seemed but like the poor, scant crumbs
Left over from a sumptuous feast. Each day
That Piero came, Maria's eyes had questioned

In dumb, unuttered anguish, — "And is this
The *last* time?" But he ever shook his head,
And said, "Not yet, Love, — surely thou shalt learn
When there is need!" For though he knew well-nigh
The very hour when San Miniato's doors
Should open and send forth into the world
Two new, young Priests, closing on him instead,
He would not tell her too, but braved alone
The fear of that last parting, now so near,
That stared him in the face, and froze his blood
Like some dread Gorgon's stony, awful gaze,
Until Maria, lulled by this delay
To fatal, soft security, began
To dream, mayhap, these days and weeks of grace
Might still glide on and on indefinitely,
An even stream whose end no man could see.

And so at last had come one chilly eve,
With starless skies and soughing winds, — 't was now
Far on in autumn, — when Maria's heart
Was filled with peace so deep that her sad eyes
For the first time since Piero thus had come

Forgot to ask the accustomed, anxious question.
He lingered long that night, ay, far beyond
His present wont, and spoke more tender words,
And unsuspecting still, her secret soul
Rejoiced at both.
But when he rose to go,
And, with a passionate gesture turned to her,
And strained her to his heart, and touched an instant
Her brow and cheeks and eyes with fervid lips, —
She suddenly understood, e'en ere she heard
A broken whisper at her ear, — "Beloved, —
God help us both, — this is — must be — the last!"
But when no answer came, and he glanced down,
He found that she hung lifeless in his arms,
In a deep, deathlike swoon, and but he stayed her
Had fallen at his feet, and with a groan
Cried out, — "My God, and have I slain her!"
Nay,
Came the swift thought, — O Heaven, far better thus!
And so he raised in trembling arms the slight,
Beloved form, and bore her to a couch,

And chafed the marble brow and icy hands
For one brief moment, summoned hastily then
Her little maid, and when she came, stood by
But long enough to see if she revived,
And when he saw that a faint, fluttering breath
Stirred the sweet bosom, and the closed lids moved,
He broke away ere those dear eyes could open,
Covering his face, and fled the house forever.

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So the great sacrifice was consummated,
And two young lives and souls whom God made one,
Parted forever, for dear love of Him.
Winter and spring and summer came and went,
Another and another changing year,
Finding the two behind their Convent walls
Shut from the world. But yet there dawned a day
When Lisa saw her blest Madonna robed
In that fair wedding-gown, the bride of Heaven,
Then in brief space a morning when the doors
Swung open, and the cloistered ones were free
To seek their godly tasks in wider fields.
And still the same old world spun on its track,

And still the seasons rolled their even course,
And weeks and months and years sped one by one,
Till ten at last were numbered, — a whole decade
Had added in slow growth another ring,
To that strange, deathless, magic tree called Time.
The Fra Francesco — Piero once — had grown
A mighty preacher and most holy man,
Whose fame spread far and wide beyond the town
Through all the echoing land, that justly praised him
Second to none save Fra Girolamo
In wondrous power God granted him to win
Men's souls from sin. And there was none among
The City's poor, or ill, or sore of heart,
Who knew not Sor Teresa, — ay, Maria
Di Montfeltro, she had once been named, —
And blessed her for an angel of sweet mercy,
Sent them by Heaven, — above all others, too,
The orphan children, whom she ever gave
Her tenderest love and care. Thus still they breathed
The self-same air beneath the self-same skies,

Nay, labored oft, mayhap, in neighboring huts,
Beside some couch of pain, but yet it chanced
That Piero and Maria, face to face,
Had never met again, save once.
It was
A balmy, golden day in early spring,
When Fra Francesco, passing through the streets
Alone, and with bent head, as was his wont,
Was roused from sober meditation, seeing
That round the scaffold of a church, new-built
But not completed, a small crowd had gathered, —
Some workmen in their aprons, and a flock
Of little girls, — by their quaint caps and gowns
He knew them orphans, — round some prostrate form,
A woman, in dark robes, — and drawing near,
And questioning them, he heard, — "Yes, the good Sister
Was passing with her orphans, when a plank,
Dropped by some careless lad, fell from on high,
And she, perceiving it, sprang suddenly forward
To save the youngest child that ran ahead,
And so herself received the blow, but grazing
Her head, they thought, — they knew not, was she hurt,
But she had swooned, it seemed, and" —

"Stand aside!"
And all gave instant way to Fra Francesco,
As lifting the light burden in his arms,
He bore her to a rude, low hut close by, —
The workmen kept their tools here over night,
And one slept there for guard, — that his swift glance
Had marked at once, and laid her on the couch,
Closing the door behind him.
The white hood
And long, dark veil crushed down about her head
Concealed her face, yet he knew instantly
Whom he had held close to his quivering heart,
In arms that well-nigh shook, as at her touch
The old, familiar, unforgotten thrill
Flashed through each vein, — and now he hastily threw
Her veil aside, with hands unsteady.
Yes, —
'T was she, Maria, who lay there before him,
As white and still, but yet, thank God, unhurt —
Oh, strange, most strange, they thus should meet again! —
As when he saw her last, long years ago, —
O Heaven, what weary, endless years! Maria,

Young even as then, and beauteous, — nay, but more,
Time had but touched to make her fairer still
Than in the bygone days. Not all the folds
Of her close, dusky garb could wholly hide
The slender lines of that pure, virgin form,
And pain and prayer and patient sacrifice,
Had set their chastening seal upon her face,
Till every feature, radiant from within,
Seemed touched with sweet, unconscious sanctity,
While on the snowy brow lay — unawares
Escaping from its band — a short, soft curl
Of the bright hair that once had held the sun.

And as he stood thus gazing down on her,
The man's deep, fiery, pulsing heart, so long
Crushed back, subdued, denied, but never conquered,
Leaped suddenly forth, and, like a pent-up flame,
In one wild throb burst from its living tomb,
Through all the cerements of his priestly vows,
All the dim ashes chilly, deadening years
Had gathered there in vain. The swift, hot blood
Flushed to his brow, and sinking on one knee
He bent above the couch, and pressed his lips

In one long, passionate, clinging kiss to hers.
And felt that they responded, that her hands
Stole softly round his neck, and heard her whisper,
With eyes still closed, as in a rapturous trance, —
"Piero! — My God! Ah, Piero mine, — thou, — thou, —
I knew that I should waken thus, — I know
We both have died, and this is Paradise!"

"Not yet!" he murmured, — "nay, O God, — not yet!"
And thus recalled, rose shuddering to his feet,
And when her lids were raised, and she gazed round
In questioning wonder, and then started up,
He stood far off from her with set, white face,
And eyes that would not see her.
"Sor Teresa,"
He gravely said, "we found you in a swoon,
Yet, thank the Saints, methinks not injured! So
If you be now restored and strong enough,
Let's hence, at once, — your orphans anxiously
Wait you without!"
"Ay, Fra Francesco, — Yes,
I come, and I am strong!" she gently answered,

And drew with one swift, searching glance at him
The dusky veil more closely round her face.

So in unbroken silence they passed out
Into the sunlight of the street again.
He, with bent head and gloomy eyes, resolved
Long prayers and penances must purge his soul
From that one moment's lapse of sanctity;
She, with uplifted face and radiant brow,
And saying in her clear, melodious voice,
As all the children flocked about her, — "Ay,
Thank you, my darlings, — see, I am unhurt!
'T is time to go!"
And as she moved away,
Holding a happy child by either hand,
All her rejoicing soul cried out, — "He loves me!
All, all is well, — oh, passing, passing well!
Dear Lord be praised, through all eternity!"

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